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ABSTRACT

Despite the current enthusiasm for teaching critical thinking and the need acknowledged by many educators to improve students' speaking and listening skills, very few schools have actually put critical listening skills into their curricula. One reason listening skills have been so slow in becoming a part of the formal instruction program at most schools is that many people confuse "listening" with "hearing." Listening is actually more than hearing as it involves sensing, interpretation, evaluation, and response as well. Furthermore, it is through speaking and listening that students acquire knowledge, develop language, and increase their understanding of themselves. As students learn language, they learn to think, and the pervasiveness of language itself in the teaching of any subject suggests that the teaching of listening skills can be a primary strategy in the development of critical thinking skills. Some of the skills needed for effective critical listening are: (1) evaluating the strength of the speaker's main ideas and the quality of supporting evidence; (2) recognizing the difference between fact and opinion; and (3) recognizing the use of loaded language, stereotypes, and/or emotional appeals. These skills can and should be taught in schools. Authors such as Joan Sayre and Harvey Weiss offer guidelines for developing better listening, and outline critical listening skills. By using these resources and by combining and applying the ideas of philosophers and neurolinguists, listening instructors can develop principles, practices and exercises that establish the ways and means of listening critically. (Twenty-four references are attached.) (PRA)

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CRITICAL LISTENING -- A NEGLECTED SKILL

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CRITICAL LISTENING -- A NEGLECTED SKILL!

by Richard A. Hunsaker

We live in an age of communication where well over fifty percent of the information we receive comes to us through the reception of aural stimuli. Indeed, spoken words are all around us. Teachers speak and students hear hundreds and thousands of words each day. They hear, but do they listen? All too frequently, the complaint is made that people do not listen...to us...to each other. Parents do not listen to their children, and the children are not listening to their parents. Employers do not listen to their employees, and the employees are not listening to their employers. Teachers do not listen to their students. And what teacher has failed to complain, "My students are not listening to me!"

It is also obvious to most teachers that poor communication skills severely restrict learning. When all human communication activity is considered, it is the oral skills that make up nearly eighty percent of a student's communication time. The "average" student's communication time breaks down as follows: forty-seven percent is spent at the skill of listening; thirty-two percent at speaking; fourteen percent at reading; and eight percent at writing. It is the oral skills of speaking and listening that students and teachers--that people-- depend on and use most. Sadly, however, it is these same skills of speaking and listening, and most especially the skill of listening, which receive the least attention in our schools. It is the purpose of this paper, then, that listening, and most especially the skill of critical listening, can and should be taught

in our schools.

The very nature of listening mandates educational attention. While it may be true that listening instruction is receiving greater notice than it has in the past, it is still largely neglected as a teachable skill in most schools. Wolvin and Coakley's 1979 observation that listening "remains the 'orphan' of the language arts" is unfortunately still valid in far too many schools today. Yet most K-12 schools continue to invest a preponderance of educational time and dollars in teaching the skills of reading and writing. And while some junior and senior high schools do have a course or even courses designed to improve their students' speaking skills, very few schools have instituted listening courses, or, better perhaps, listening training built into and/or across their curricula. It does seem strange, then, that the amount of educational time we spend in our schools teaching the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening is in reverse proportion to the amount of time we spend engaged in those communication activities, as noted above. The one communication skill that most of us engage in more than any of the others--the skill of listening--is the same skill in which most of us have had little or no training!

The problem wouldn't be so bad if most people were fairly good listeners without listening training. the sad fact is that most people are poor listeners, and worse, probably don't even know it. The average adult in this country listens at less than fifty percent listening efficiency level. Worse, the average adult retention rate is also less than fifty percent. That means most people understand or attend to less than half of what they hear and remember only half of

that! For example, in school at the end of a fifty minute lecture, most students will leave the class having attended to or understood less than half of what was said by their instructor. And by the next day the typical student will remember less than half of that, retaining only twenty-five percent of what was said. To exacerbate the problem even further, as previously noted, many experts tell us that well over fifty percent (some go as far as to say eighty percent) of what we "know" is acquired through the skill of listening. This is especially true in our schools. As Thomas Devine (1982) points out, in spite of the fact that most teachers "are aware of the limitations of the lecture method, they continue to talk."

One reason listening skills have been so slow in becoming a part of the formal instructional program of most schools is that many people confuse "listening" with "hearing." Ralph Nichols told us years ago (1957) that hearing and listening were not synonymous. Lyman Steil (1982) declared that listening was not only much more than hearing, but also that it involved the four-step process of sensing, interpretation, evaluation, and response. James Floyd (1985) not only defined listening as a process that includes "hearing, attending to, understanding, evaluating, and responding to spoken messages," he went on to state that "this definition assumes that listeners should be active participants in the communication process, and that listening improvement occurs as listeners learn to perform each of these behaviors more effectively." Wolff, Marsnik, Tacey and Nichols (1983) offer this definition of listening: "Listening is a unitary-receptive communication process of hearing and selecting, assimilating and organizing, and retaining and covertly responding to aural and

nonverbal stimuli." And after acknowledging that the definition of listening continues to be in the developmental process, Wolvin and Coakley, in their classic text Listening (1988), define listening simply as "the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli."

If there are differences in and difficulties with the various definitions of wha listening is, and there ar (See "A Content Analysis of Fifty Definitions of Listening," by Ethel Glenn, Journal of the International Listening Association, Volume 3, 1989, pp. 21-31), most authorities agree that memory--remembering--is a part of the listening process. Earl Stevick (1976) wrote that there is no communication when there is no retention. Richardson, Brown and Barker (1989) report a strong positive relationship between listening and reading span. "This was not altogether surprising since much has been made of the relationship between memory and listening," they wrote. Wolvin and Coakley (1988) suggest that remembering, which they define as "the process of storing stimuli in the mind for the purpose of recalling them later," is involved in all aspects of listening and is inherent to that process "when a listener actively engages in the total listening process." And Steil, Barker and Watson (1983) warn of the danger in thinking that "listening" and "memory" are interchangeable. It is important to distinguish between short-term and long-term memory, they argue, so that we may better understand "the relationship between listening and memory." Finally, Thomas Devine suggests that at its most basic level, listening "is simply a matter of processing the incoming meaningful sounds into syntactical and larger units so that the listener may make sense of the sound...like

decoding in reading. However, thinking and the mental operations associated with it are involved in both decoding and listening." Passivity among educators regarding speaking and listening as teachable skills results in an inferior educational product. Increasing competition for jobs in today's society requires a productive individual, proficient in all communication skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. There are differences, of course, as well as similarities among the four communication skills. Speaking and writing are expressive activities; reading and listening are receptive. Speaking and listening use auditory symbols primarily; reading and writing use visual symbols. Speaking and listening situations involve more dynamic interpersonal relationships than the relative solitude of reading and writing.. An excellent writer may be an uncommunicative speaker. An excellent speaker may have difficulty being expressive in written form. And a student who listens poorly may well be an excellent speaker. Perhaps Sara Lundsteen put it best when she wrote (1979):

> The receiving sections of the language arts, reading and listening, support thinking by making use of skillfully acquired information. Not all problems are solved by using effective listening and reading, but it is doubtful that many are solved without help from these subskills. Listening is a crucial beginning link in the chain of subskills...a subskill to productive, creative problem solving.

It is through speaking and listening that we acquire knowledge, develop language, and increase our understanding of each other and ourselves.

As students learn language, then, they learn to think. Indeed, the pervasiveness of language itself in the teaching of any subject suggests that the teaching of listening skills can be primary strategies in the development of critical thinking skills.. Christopher Thaiss points out (1984) that language, thinking and

learning are inseparable. "If we do not apply the full range of language resources to our learning of any subject," according to Thaiss, "then we stifle thought, conscious and unconscious, and so deprive ourselves of more than the most superficial understanding." Mary Bozik (1986) also points to the strong connection between thinking and listening. "The process of listening," according to Bozik, "contains four steps: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. The sensing stage is physiological; the other three are cognitive." Bozik adds that the final step is also behavioral, and suggests that it "is helpful to think that what is done as a result of thinking (or listening) is as crucial as the thinking or listening process itself."

There are some who argue that the distinction between "thinking" and "listening" is, at best, artificial, and that listening is an inseparable part of the cognitive process. Hauser and Hughes, for example, suggest that "attempts to define and/or study the process must not look at listening just as a skill, but instead listening must be examined as part of the overall schema of cognitive processing." Sara Lundsteen offers this "quick" definition of listening as "the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind." Lundsteen goes on to point out that "complex processes are inadequately defined in one sentence or even in one paragraph." Vicki Sullivan suggests (1989) that all students would "profit from instruction that emphasizes process, integration and thinking." According to Sullivan, the receiving sections of the language arts, listening and reading, combined with the expressive language processes, speaking and writing, form the basis for developing the

thinking skills pertinent to all disciplines. Sullivan goes on to state that composing is critical to the thought process "because it actively engages the learner in constructing meaning. Comprehending is critical because it requires the learner to reconstruct meaning expressed by another." She concludes by stating:

> All students should profit from instruction that emphasizes process, integration and thinking. It is a simple matter to use the language processes in mechanical ways such as copying, repeating and memorizing that do not reflect real thinking. But the more complex, purposeful ways...should result in more actively involved learners who learn to think more critically and creatively within each discipline.

Lipman argues (1988) that it is not enough to give students practice in only a select number of skills. Rather, "we must begin with the raw subject matter of communication and inquiry--with reading, listening, speaking, writing, and reasoning--as we cultivate all the skills that the mastery of such processes entails." Lundsteen compares listening to the other language arts and concludes that listening not only has been slighted in instructional programs of the past, but that an "integrated language arts program is a program in language and thinking." Why then, isn't listening a part of the formal instructional program of most schools? One reason already noted was that most people confuse "hearing" with "listening." Another reason is that many people spend so much time talking and hearing others talk (recall that more than seventy-five percent of our communication time is spent on the oral skills of speaking and listening), they tend to take these behaviors for granted. To counter this attitude, it is helpful to examine the question, "Why do we listen?" Most experts classify listening into the following types: appreciative listening, discriminative listening, comprehensive listening, empathic or therapeutic listening. Empathy refers to the ability to experience how

someone feels. An empathic listener is one who communicates an interest in others and a willingness to listen without judgment or criticism.

Perhaps the most difficult type of listening, the kind some people never learn to do well, is critical listening. Defined as listening to evaluate and form judgments (contrary to empathic listening), critical listening involves both understanding and evaluation. Critical listening requires the listener first to understand what the speaker is saying--his arguments and reasons for believing them. Next the critical listener must evaluate what the speaker says. Essentially, this requires the listener to compare what she understands to some criteria or basis for judging what she has understood. The effective critical listener must examine the speaker's reasons, evidence, examples, etc. to determine whether or not these provide adequate support for what is being proposed. In other words, the critical listener must evaluate what the speaker says to determine whether she agrees or disagrees. For example, should the listener buy the shoes the salesman is trying to sell? Should she vote for a certain candidate? Should she sign up for a public speaking class on a friend's recommendation? These and dozens of similar questions can best be answered through the process of critical listening.

Some of the skills needed for effective critical listening include: 1)evaluating the strength of the speaker's main idea(s) and the quality of the supporting evidence; 2) recognizing the difference between fact and opinion; and 3) recognizing the use of loaded language, stereotypes, and/or emotional appeals. And of course, critical listening utilizes many of the techniques necessary for

effective discriminative and comprehensive listening. According to Sayer, these techniques "are in addition to reasoning, recognition of biases, open-mindedness and the withholding of judgments until the speaker has finished." Finally, Wolvin and Coakley (1979) point out that the critical listener must "be aware of the effects of language, arguments, appeals, and credibility of the speaker on his or her understanding and subsequent evaluation of the message. To be an effective listener, one must first thoroughly understand the message and then form judgments about it, deciding whether to accept or reject it."

Resnick and Klopfer point to the fundamental principle that learning requires knowledge, but that cognitive research also demonstrates that knowledge cannot be given directly to students. According to them students cannot interpret new situations, solve problems, think, reason and even learn, until they first question what they are told and examine the new information in relation to other information. In other words, students must be able to listen critically before learning is possible. Ella Erway (1985) pointed to one of the difficulties in teaching "listening." She stated that listening is situation and content specific, while definitions of listening behavior are global and do not examine the nature of the response. Nevertheless, listening competency can be defined, according to Erway, "as a high level of interactive functioning of a complex of attitudinal, sensory, and cognitive competencies. The valid measurement of listening competency requires the consideration of the variables of mode of presentation, content of the message, and the sensing and processing potential of the listener."

It was more than 30 years ago, July 1957, that Ralph Nichols published an article in Nation's Business entitled "Listening is a 10-Part Skill." In September 1987, the article was reprinted preceded by this editorial comment: "Over the decades, Nation's Business has published hundreds of articles on successful management techniques. The one that drew the greatest number of reprint requests was written by Ralph G. Nichols..." Joan Sayre published in her book, How to Listen, what she called ten guidelines for developing better listening habits. Sayre readily acknowledges the work of Nichols, who has been telling people for more than 30 years that listening skills can be improved in the following ten ways:

1. Find an area of interest in every speaker's topic.
2. Judge content, not delivery.
3. Withhold evaluation until the speaker's message is complete.
4. Listen for ideas.
5. Develop flexible notetaking skills.
6. Work at listening.
7. Do not create or yield to distractions.
8. Increase the difficulty and complexity of listening experiences
9. Keep an open mind.
10. Capitalize on the difference between thought speed and speech speed.

In his book entitled Teaching Effective Listening, Harvey Weiss suggests the following ten listening skills as critical:

1. To distinguish fact from non-fact or inference.
2. To judge validity and adequacy of main ideas, arguments, or hypotheses.

3. To distinguish well-supported statements from irrelevant and/or unsupported ones and to evaluate them.

4. To distinguish well-supported statements from opinion and judgment.

5. To inspect, compare and contrast ideas, arriving at some conclusion with regard to them.

6. To identify and evaluate such fallacies as self-contradictions, hasty generalizations, false analogies, appeals to ignorance, etc.

7. To recognize and judge effects of devices a speaker may use to influence the listener; that is, to identify and evaluate "loaded communication."

8. To detect and evaluate bias and prejudice in both the speaker and the listener.

9. To evaluate the qualifications of the speaker.

10. To evaluate ways in which the speaker's ideas might be applied in a new and/or different situation.

Mary Bozik seemed to concur with Weiss when she stated that students critical listening should be able:

1. To determine the speaker's competence, purpose and bias.

2. To recognize the effect word choice has on the message.

3. To distinguish between fact and opinion.

4. To draw appropriate inferences.

5. To evaluate the amount and quality of supporting materials.

It was the purpose of this paper to make a case for the teaching of critical listening skills in our schools. Despite the current enthusiasm for teaching critical thinking and the acknowledged need by many educators to improve our students' speaking and listening skills, very few schools have actually put into their curricula the teaching of critical listening skills. To use the language of the debater, the need is there. And the means to solve that need is within our grasp. As Bob Bohlken (1990) put it:

The area for listening instruction which has an excellent potential for development is receptive reasoning or critical listening. Applying and combining the thoughts of Aristotle, Korzybski, Burke, Toulmin and neurolinguists, listening instructors can develop principles, practices and exercises that establish the ways and means of listening critically to a message.

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